

Peter A. B. Thomson (2005).

Belize: A Concise History.

Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean.

192 pages, 29 illustrations and 7 maps
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Reviewed by Joseph O. Palacio

Thomson sets the aim of his volume as an effort to explain two characteristics that strike an outsider about Belizeans: “tolerance and individualism, not a natural combination, but one which sits easily enough in Belize” (p. xv). He does not elaborate at the end of the book whether he succeeded in showing to his reader the genesis of this inner characteristic of Belizeans. On the other hand, by the end of the book the reader will have found that Thomson has achieved the objective he sets for himself at the beginning, namely “to set out a concise and, as far as possible, factual framework of political, administrative, and economic history...” (p. ix). [1]

Thomson’s allusion to the gestalt of Belizeans is in keeping with his laid back style – maintained throughout the book – of writing a layman’s armchair historical essay. Such a tone gives the book an anti-positivist and even postmodern type of appeal. Indeed, he adds in the Preface that the book is designed not for the scholar but for the student or “curious visitor” (p.ix). [2]

In the first part of this review I will show what Thomson has achieved from the book as a layman’s collection of essays. In the other I will argue that the author could have achieved a more scholarly text with some additional work. [3]

Thomson’s main achievement is in reducing a large array of material covering more than three centuries into sixteen chapters, almost all equal in length, thereby demonstrating a fairly equitable distribution in his bias. While together the chapters portray a comprehensive and concise précis of Belizean history, each chapter was designed to be a stand-alone treatment of a given topic. Furthermore, the author has an easily understood writing style, although some sentences can become too long and convoluted. [4]

Within the larger context of writings on Belize’s history, Thomson’s volume can be recommended as first reading to the student looking for an overall picture. Afterwards, the student can follow topics in greater detail in other volumes. [5]

For a person, who is a non-historian by profession and whose closest connection to Belize was to serve as British High Commissioner from 1987 to 1990, Thomson has accomplished a tremendous contribution to the history of Belize. His work demonstrates the collection of much primary data mostly from the Colonial Office records at the Public

Records Office in London, and, for two months, at the Belize Archives in Belmopan. Despite what the author modestly said about the book as not being a “comprehensive textbook”, nor “a re-interpretation of Belizean history”, nor “primarily a social study”, (p. ix), he put in a great deal of scholarly effort at data collection, analysis, and synthesis into easily readable paragraphs and chapters. All this painstaking work certainly elevates the book from being a collection of layman’s essays into a respectable text on the history of Belize. My primary critique is that with a relatively small amount of additional work and attention to detail, the work could augment its stature to a highly scholarly text, notwithstanding the author’s modesty. The following are gaps that need more attention. [6]

A main weakness of the volume is in the use of illustrations and maps. There are no page references to the photographic illustrations and they were not placed close enough to the appropriate parts of the text. Besides, there are no cross-references from the text to the illustrations, leaving them as an appendage. Out of seven maps only three are good enough to be used – Map A “Modern Caribbean”, Map B “Modern Belize”, and Map C “British Honduras in the mid-19th century”. Map D “Maya Sites in Belize” could have included many more sites with some help from Belize’s Institute of Archaeology. In the case of Map E “Early British Settlements in Mexico and Central America Shown in Italics”, it is not clear to what time period the map refers and what the sites actually were. Finally, the name of Map F “Battle of St. George’s Cay” is a misnomer. It should be “Main Cayes used in the Battle of St. George’s Caye”. [7]

There were some lapses in orthography as well as typographical errors. By the time the manuscript was written the spelling was no longer Ketchi (p. xiv) but K’ekchi, and has subsequently become Q’eqchi’. The name of the group of Maya rebels during the Caste War was not “Chichuanha” but “Chichenha” (p.91). In note 68 on p. 138 there is an omission of “there”. [8]

The author did not follow normal conventions in his use of references. He did not state at the beginning of the book the meaning of the abbreviations that he would be using in his “Notes”, such as FCO, ABH, BA, etc. He did not warn the reader that he would be isolating published references at the end of only two chapters, chapters 1 and 14. He cited other publications in the other chapters which were not similarly identified. Besides, there was no comprehensive bibliography at the end of the book for the reader to follow for greater detail. Finally, the index was too sparing given the concise character of the book and the need to easily identify topics. [9]

He uses scores of notes in each chapter to indicate where he got his data, should the reader want to go to the source for verification. But notes should also supplement information, whether published or not. This is the more important in Thomson’s abbreviated text. Several times additional notes would have added a degree of wholesomeness to a point that the author was making. [10]

There was need for another level of elaboration, namely setting the parameters of the content within the larger historiography of Belize. As in the case of other smaller

CARICOM states, there have been few published histories of Belize and invariably they follow the themes of political structure and socio-economy. Thomson's content comes closest to Narda Dobson's (1973) in terms of the time period and the emphasis on constitutional evolution from the early colonial era. There is some overlap with Grant (1976) in the later stages of the decolonization process from 1950 to the 1970. Bolland's encyclopedic work (1977, 1988, and 1997) on social history provides much depth on topics that Thomson could only briefly mention. Finally, Shoman's (1994) ideological re-interpretation of Belize's history provides some content where Thomson could only be sketchy. In not deliberately carving out his own niche at the beginning of his volume by referring to what had been done earlier, Thomson did himself and the reader a disservice. He would have been able to promote why there was need for his work, pinpointing the specific areas that he would be adding to Belize's history. A concluding chapter summarizing what his main contributions had been would have provided a balance that the content seriously lacks. [11]

The previous weaknesses have been more in terms of the format and scope of Thomson's work. I now turn to issues of content. The first chapter is certainly one of the weakest in the book for he was relying more on secondary sources for a topic, which was not his forte. My criticism is more at what he did not include in his review. Unfortunately, he fell into the trap of focusing on the archaeological past of the Maya, while not combining archaeology with ethnohistory to bring the connection to the Maya of today. There continues to be more done in this important cross-over period that needs to find its way into such surveys, see, for example the works of Farris (1984), Graham (1991), Jones (1982), and Pendergast (1993). [12]

Undoubtedly, the strength of the book is in following the constitutional changes that took place in the 19th and 20th centuries, including the corresponding changes in the judiciary, legislature, and public administration. The themes that Thomson cleverly infuses into these three topics include taxation, representativity, and fiscal responsibility. He presents several scenarios of managing budgetary responsibilities in the 18th and 19th centuries with the Colonial Office in London pursuing minute details over administrative work done in Belize, an executive arm working with the various demands of the legislature, and the cries of the masses for increased public services. [13]

The fact that these same topics resonate in today's public administration shows where knowledge of history prepares one to appreciate the present and the logical frameworks that still remain pretty much intact even at this time. Thomson started his volume with a sense of modesty but he was able to marshal a tremendous array of facts that enables Belizeans to understand how their public affairs have been formed over three centuries. Such understanding transcends across the borders of Belize to other territories that share a similar historical formation. [14]

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